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The role of temporal focus and self-congruence on consumer preference and willingness to pay A new scrutiny in branding strategy

1. Introduction

People can only have direct experience of the here and now, and yet people can mentally transcend instantiating the currently experienced object in time and space, and devote their attention to thinking about future or past moments. To illustrate this, people who are currently drinking a Starbucks coffee in New York's Woolworth Building might be mentally reminiscing about their vacation memories rather than focusing on the taste of coffee and the people around them in the café. That is, they are currently "living" in the past moment instead of the present moment. Shipp *et al.* (2009) address such a phenomenon as the shift of temporal focus, where people may recollect the memories, perceive the present moment, and anticipate the future events. More importantly, the way people characteristically devote their attention to different temporal foci influences their current attitudes, decisions, and behavior (Shipp *et al.*, 2009), such as the shift in the definition of *happiness* that directly influences people's choice of product associated with calming versus exciting attributes (Mogilner *et al.*, 2012).

Temporal focus can influence the consumer's choice, albeit the manipulating task does not have a relevant context to the subsequent required behavior (Mogilner *et al.*, 2012). As such, the way people devote their attention to thinking about past, present, or future moment influences their behavioral characteristics and self-congruence (Zimbardo and Boyd, 2008). For this reason, Mogilner *et al.* (2012) call for future research that related to temporal focus and consumer decisions. Despite its importance, to date only two empirical articles have manipulated participants' temporal focus to examine the effect of temporal focus within the consumer context (Mogilner *et al.*, 2012; Winterich and Haws, 2011). Further, no systematic research has been

conducted to address the potential adverse effect of temporal focus (Fitzsimons and Moore, 2015).

For decades, psychologists adapted temporal focus to explain the different types of self-concept. For instance, Rogers (1951) presented three components of self-concept: Self worth relates to the past, self-image explains the current state, and ideal self refers to the future state. Gordon (1968) suggested the self-element by using the perspectives of the past (i.e., the reflective past and completed past), present (i.e., the past-continuous and present self), and future (i.e., the prospective and intended self). Markus and Nurius (1986) defined the identity of possible selves to be based on the explanation of the past, present, and future selves. Wilson and Ross (2001) stated the way people perceived their past and future selves is related to their perception of their current selves; consequently, they have a different evaluation of perceived self-improvement. Despite the rational linkage between temporal focus and self-concept, empirical studies on the influence of temporal focus on consumer preference toward a brand that serves as means of reflecting consumer's actual and ideal self are rarely reported.

Until recently, research on self-congruence was brand outcomes centered (e.g., Han *et al.*, 2016; Liu *et al.*, 2011; Malär *et al.*, 2011; Sirgy *et al.*, 1997; Wallace *et al.*, 2017). Scholars have claimed that actual self-congruence has a greater impact on brand outcomes than ideal self-congruence because people are more likely to present their actual self (Malär *et al.*, 2011; Sirgy, 1982). However, on online social networks sites (SNS), Hollenbeck and Kaikati (2012) found that people are more likely to integrate themselves with brands that serve as a means of reflecting their ideal selves as SNS allows an idealized view of their self-narrative (Belk, 2013), a contrary finding for the case of Back *et al.* (2010), which shows consumers tend to portray their actual ideal on the SNS. Liu *et al.* (2011) further argued that ideal self-congruence maybe more

relevant to luxury brands that associate with strong symbolic values. One explanation for the inconsistency of consumer's self-congruity could be due to the influence of malleable self-concept on a self-expressive brand (Aaker, 1999). Even though there have been substantial discussions on self-congruence, limited research has been conducted to understand the determinant of actual and ideal self-congruence (Liu *et al.*, 2011). The studies done to date tend to focus on the consequences of self-congruence and constraint their investigations within branding and consumer's psychogenic needs (e.g., Malär *et al.*, 2011; Roy and Rabbane, 2015; Wallace *et al.*, 2017). To the best of our knowledge, no study has explored the influence of temporal focus on actual and ideal self-congruence.

In this research we aim to answer following research questions: Does temporal focus affect the consumer's need for actual or ideal self-congruity? Does temporal focus influence the consumer preference and WTP for a brand that serves as a means of reflecting the consumer's actual self or ideal self? The current study contributes to the existing literature in several ways. First, we address the appeal made by Liu *et al.* (2011) to explore the determinant that affects the consumer's need for actual and ideal self-congruity. Second, we respond to Fitzsimons and Moore's (2015) call for systematic research to address the potential adverse effect of temporal focus. Third, we expand construal level theory (CLT; Trope and Liberman, 2010) by including temporal focus as an additional type of psychological distance. In the next section, we deliberate the literature review and hypotheses development, followed by presenting four studies that test the conceptual framework, and we conclude with the current research's contributions, managerial implications, limitations, and future research.

2. Literature review

2.1 Temporal focus

Temporal focus is vital in consumer research because the time perspective plays an essential psychological role in the way people think, feel, and behave (Zimbardo and Boyd, 2008) and contributes a direct impact on the different preferences (Bluedorn, 2002). Temporal focus is a perceived notion of relativistic time instead of the actual passage of time (George and Jones, 2000). *Present focus* refers to the current moment and about what is presently happening (Shipp *et al.*, 2009), however, it does not relate to mindfulness. *Future focus* refers to the representation of how people wish to behave, feel, and look in the future (Markus and Nurius, 1986). *Past focus* relates to the individual's memories and conceptions of history (Karniol and Ross, 1996).

Numerous studies have identified the importance of temporal focus from the business and organizational perspectives. Foo *et al.* (2009) found that future focus mediates the relationship between the positive affect and the entrepreneur's efforts in venture tasks that extend beyond immediate proactive behavior. That is to say, a future-oriented entrepreneur tends to be more future optimistic and is motivated to think about their venture pursuit. Nadkarni and Chen (2014) suggested that the rate of new product introduction is highly related to the profile of the CEO's temporal focus, which is reflected in their strategic business behavior in stable and dynamic environments. Cojuharenco *et al.* (2011) argued that temporal focus serves an additional factor to explain the injustice experience in the employment relationship, where present-oriented employees are more likely to be concerned about an interpersonal treatment; future-oriented employees are more likely to be concerned about an unfair outcome. Further, there are

significant positive associations between future-oriented employees and organizational citizenship behavior, including altruism, civic virtue, and courtesy (Strobel *et al.*, 2013).

In consumer research, Winterich and Haws (2011) examined the role of temporal focus in explaining the positive affect and self-control. They integrated affect and temporal focus into CLT in order to provide a greater understanding of the different positive emotions involved in the consumer decision and preference. Mogilner *et al.* (2012) found that temporal focus, rather than age per se, functions by shifting people's happiness and subsequently affecting their choice of product, the product being associated with an exciting or calming attribute. Therefore, past research have suggested that one's temporal focus—how people temporally allocate their attention, is able to influence their subsequent preference. Based on this assumption, we advocate that temporal focus, which is unrelated to brand experience and brand evaluation, is able to influence self-congruence.

2.2 Self-congruence

Self-congruence refers to the fit of the brand's personality with the consumer's self (Liu *et al.*, 2011). Malär *et al.* (2011) suggests that there are two types of self-congruence: actual and ideal self-congruence. The actual self refers to the consumers' current selves; how they see themselves and maintain their self-concept, whereas the ideal self relates to the consumers' possible selves; how they expand themselves and enhance their self-concept (Hollenbeck and Kaikati, 2012). Previous research have found that the variation of self-congruence is determined by one's psychogenic needs, such as self-esteem, public self-consciousness, social tie strength, social desirability, need for uniqueness and status consumption (Malär *et al.*, 2011; Roy and Rabbanee, 2015; Wallace *et al.*, 2017).

Self-congruence has significant positive effect on brand attitude and brand loyalty (Han *et al.*, 2016; Liu *et al.*, 2011), emotional brand attachment (Malär *et al.*, 2011), brand love and positive word of mouth (Wallace *et al.*, 2017), and brand preference (Sirgy *et al.*, 1997). Self-congruence is evident when consumers perceive their self-concept match with the brand personality, brand user imagery, or brand usage imagery (Liu *et al.*, 2011), subsequently they tend to have higher preference and are willing to pay more for the brand as means for self-expression (Chernev *et al.*, 2011).

2.3 Hypotheses development

[Figure 1 about here]

We draw from literature on CLT and build our theoretical framework on CLT because it provides a theoretical underpinning for explaining the association between psychological distance and low-level versus high-level construals of self (Trope *et al.*, 2007). Psychological distance refers to the subjective experience that is either close to or far away from the individual's self (Trope and Liberman, 2010). Apart from the temporal, spatial, social, and hypothetical distance, we suggest that temporal focus (i.e., distant future and distant past focus) influences people mentally so that they transcend the experience of the immediate situation—people form abstract mental construals of distal objects.

We identify the relationship between temporal focus and self-congruence by examining the effect on brand preference and WTP. Brand preference and WTP are selected because previous research highlight the constructs are sensitive toward the low-level versus high-level

construals of self (Maier and Wilken, 2014). Further, brand preference and WTP explain the degree of a brand's ability to serve as a means of self-expression (Chernev *et al.*, 2011). We operationally define brand preference as the consumer's tendency to buy one particular preferred brand in the circumstances before making a decision (Sirgy *et al.*, 1997), whereas WTP relates to the maximum price the consumer is willing to pay for an item from a set of alternatives (Werthenbroch and Skiera, 2002).

When the focus is on the present moment, people think in concrete terms as they currently experience the moment and are inclined to utilize all of its rich and contextualized features (Trope *et al.*, 2007). Therefore, their psychological distance from the direct experience of reality appears to be closer to and associated with the low-level construals of self (Trope and Liberman, 2010). We suggest that people engaged with the low-level construals of self is likely to have higher preference and is willing to pay more for a brand that serves as a means of reflecting their actual self (where they in the here and now) in order to seek for an answer as to how a brand could possibly represent their current identity (Trope and Liberman, 2010). In contrast, a brand that serves as a means of reflecting the ideal self requires people to imagine their possible selves and these are represented in an abstract and decontextualized manner, thus the selves are vague and less likely to match with people engaged with the low-level construals of self (Malär *et al.*, 2011).

H1. The consumer who focuses on the present moment tends to have higher preference and is willing to pay more for a brand that serves as a means of reflecting the consumer's actual self than for a brand that serves as a means of reflecting the consumer's ideal self.

When the focus is on the distant future moment, people conceptualize objects in abstract terms because they do not have any direct experience of them. Thus, they have greater psychological distance from the immediate experience and are inclined to associate with high-level construals of future self (Trope *et al.*, 2007). High-level construals of future self adopt a psychologically distant position that portrays the desired self, which is separable from the current self. Markus and Nurius (1986) defined the future self as people having ideas, beliefs, goals, hopes, and images about their potential that often perceive could be realized. As a result, we advocate that people engaged with the high-level construals of future self is likely to have higher preference and is willing to pay more for a brand that serves as a means of reflecting their ideal self, because it reflects the way people think and anticipate their optimal selves (Markus and Nurius, 1986).

H2. The consumer who focuses on the distant future moment tends to have higher preference and is willing to pay more for a brand that serves as a means of reflecting the consumer's ideal self than for a brand that serves as a means of reflecting the consumer's actual self.

We propose that people who focus on the distant past moment are associated with high-level construals of self. The reason for this is that when people recall memories from the distant past events, it results in a distal psychological position, thus forming abstract mental construals. Further, Markus and Nurius (1986) stated that people selectively create a positive image of their past self from their memories in a more abstract way. Thus, people reactivate their desired past self again because of their beliefs about self-efficacy that result from their past success (Bandura,

1982), which then functions as a set of interpretive frameworks for making sense of past behavior and as means–ends patterns for new behavior (Markus and Nurius, 1986).

H3. The consumer who focuses on the distant past moment tends to have higher preference and is willing to pay more for a brand that serves as a means of reflecting the consumer's ideal self than for a brand that serves as a means of reflecting the consumer's actual self.

3. Study 1

The goal of Study 1 was to test the association between temporal focus and self-congruence. In particular, this study intends to investigate whether there is a difference in a brand's ability to serve as a means of reflecting the consumer's actual self versus consumer's ideal self when the consumer focuses on the present moment versus future moment.

3.1 Design and procedure

Three hundred students (59% women) from a large public university from Finland were approached to participate in a self-administrated questionnaire. Twenty-seven percent of the sample were aged from 18 to 20 years old, 62% were from 21 to 30 years old, and 11% were from 31 to 60 years old. Participants were asked to answer on a 7-point scale (ranging from 1 = *strongly disagree* to 7 = *strongly agree*) three items about self-esteem ($\alpha = .89$; adapted from Rosenberg, 1965) and four items about public self-consciousness ($\alpha = .74$; adapted from Fenigstein *et al.*, 1975). Self-esteem and public self-consciousness were judged to examine if there are moderating effects on self-concept (Malär *et al.*, 2011). Next, the participants were asked to answer on a 7-point scale the extent to their temporal focus by completing the phrase

“At this moment in time, I am thinking about ...” and “At this moment in time, my mind is focused on ...” 1 = *the present moment* and 7 = *a future moment* ($\alpha = .71$, adapted from Shipp *et al.*, 2009). Lastly, the participants were asked to answer on a 7-point scale the extent of self-congruence by completing the phrase “I would prefer a brand that is consistent with how I see my ...” and “I would prefer a brand to reflect my ...” 1 = *actual self* and 7 = *ideal self* ($\alpha = .80$, adapted from Sirgy *et al.*, 1997).

3.2 Results and discussion

The Pearson correlation revealed a significant positive relationship between temporal focus and self-congruence ($r = .27$, $N = 300$, $p < .001$). We categorized the present and future focus groups by using 4 $[(1 + 7)/2]$ as a cut-off point for temporal focus mean scores. The participants' mean scores below 4 were categorized as the *present focus group* ($N = 107$), whereas the mean scores that were above 4 were categorized as the *future focus group* ($N = 154$). We grouped those with a mean score of 4 into the *neutral group* ($N = 39$). The participants in the temporal focus groups did not show significant differences in self-esteem, $F(2,297) = .64$, $p > .10$, and public self-consciousness, $F(2,297) = 2.46$, $p > .05$, but there was a significant difference in self-congruence, $F(2,297) = 7.33$, $p = .001$. The participants placed in the future focus group rated the brand's ability to serve as a means of reflecting their ideal self ($M = 4.05$, $SD = 1.24$) compared to those in the present focus group, $M = 3.46$, $SD = 1.27$; $t(259) = 3.71$, $p < .001$, but there was a non-significant difference in rating from the neutral group, $M = 3.68$, $SD = 1.05$; $t(191) = 1.70$, $p > .05$. We used a similar classification method to group self-congruence into *actual self*, *ideal self*, and *neutral* options. The participants in the present focus group preferred a brand that served as a means of reflecting their actual self (58%) over their ideal self

(27%) or the neutral option, 15%; χ^2 (31.53), $N = 107$, $p < .001$. In contrast, the participants in the future focus group preferred a brand that served as a means of reflecting their ideal self (54%) over their actual self (29%) or the neutral option, 17%; χ^2 (34.34), $N = 154$, $p < .001$. The result showed a non-significant difference in option from the neutral temporal group, χ^2 (1.08), $N = 39$, $p > .10$.

Study 1 suggests that the people who characteristically devoted their attention to thinking about the present moment were more likely to associate with actual self-congruence and those who thought about the future moment were more likely to associate with ideal self-congruence. However, scholars found that people may be involved in more than a single time frame (Shipp *et al.*, 2009; Zimbardo and Boyd, 2008). For instance, people who focus on the present moment can be equally interested in current events as they are in a future activity. Thus, we suspected that the participants who had a mean score of 4 in their temporal focus were engaged with multiple temporal foci, where this group of the participants was not shown to have a significant difference in self-congruence.

In Study 1, we noticed the challenge of using a survey to identify an individual's temporal focus. Further, the question remains as to whether the effect of temporal focus and self-congruence influence brand preference and WTP. We addressed these issues in the three experimental studies. We adapted the priming procedure from Zimbardo and Boyd (2008) in order to manipulate the temporal focus. The self-customization procedure was adapted to prompt the consumer's need for self-congruity because this method was commonly used in the self-concept and marketing research (Chernev *et al.*, 2011).

4. Study 2

The objective of Study 2 was to investigate the effect of present focus and the effect of a brand's ability to serve as a means of reflecting the consumer's actual self versus consumer's ideal self on brand preference and WTP.

4.1 Design and procedure

Sixty students (62% women) from a large public university from Finland were approached to participate in an experiment in exchange for a small gift. Thirty-eight percent of the sample were aged from 18 to 20 years old, 50% were from 21 to 30 years old, and 12% were from 31 to 60 years old. The study was a 2 (self-congruence: actual or ideal) \times 2 (temporal focus: present focus or control) between-subjects design. The participants were randomly assigned to think about customizing a clothing that could serve as a means of reflecting their actual self or ideal self by indicating responses to seven items that relate to their clothing styles, size, favorite colors, and so on (see appendix). We included the following definitions of consumer's self (Hollenbeck and Kaikati, 2012) in order to have a better understanding of the terminology used: *Actual self* relates to who you are now; how you see yourself and maintain your self-concept. Your actual self reflects your actual personality traits, social roles, and what happens in your life and experiences. *Ideal self* relates to the many selves you could be; how you expand yourself and enhance your self-concept. Your ideal self reflects your ideal personality traits, social roles, and what will happen in your life and experiences. The participants then were asked to rate on 5-point scale (1 = *strongly disagree* and 5 = *strongly agree*) the extent to which they were "in the present moment" and their mind was "in the here and now" ($\alpha = .75$; adapted from Shipp *et al.*, 2009). Next, the participants were randomly assigned to either a control or a treatment in which they were given a present focus writing task that was adapted from Zimbardo and Boyd (2008, pp. 129–131). The participants were informed that personal data was not to be

collected. After that, they were asked to answer a set of present focus questions. They were encouraged to use their native language to list their answers to engender better expression. Further, they were encouraged to respond to the questions at a slow pace by focusing on themselves, their surroundings, and their feelings. The task then went on to instruct the participants to stay calm and silently repeated five times “I am here in the present moment” (Mogilner *et al.*, 2012). The participants then were asked to indicate their post rating for the present focus items. The participants in the control group were not exposed to this task.

Next, the participants were asked to imagine they were in a shopping complex. They were told that a new brand called Vero Ideale matched their customized clothing. They were asked to respond to three items by giving brand preference ($\alpha = .84$; 1 = *strongly disagree* and 5 = *strongly agree*; adapted from Sirgy *et al.*, 1997). Then they were presented with a set of clothing price tags (Brand 1: 52.95€; Brand 2: 79.95€; Brand 3: 39.95€; Brand 4: 65.95€), and this was followed by asking them to indicate their WTP Vero Ideale clothing that ranged in price between 39.95€ and 79.95€. Lastly, the participants were asked to rate on a 5-point scale two items for self-congruence check by completing the phrases “Vero Ideale is consistent with how I see my ...” and “Vero Ideale serves as a means of reflecting my ...” 1 = *actual self* and 5 = *ideal self* ($\alpha = .87$).

4.2 Results and discussion

The manipulation checks confirmed that the participants who were assigned to the present focus writing task were more present focused ($M_{\text{post}} = 4.12$, $SD = .50$) than those in the control group, $M = 3.28$, $SD = .63$; $t(58) = 5.69$, $p < .001$. A paired-samples t-test showed a significant difference in the pre- versus post-present focus measure after the manipulation, $M_{\text{pre}} =$

3.22, $SD = .77$; $t(29) = -5.77$, $p < .001$. The self-congruence check revealed that the participants rated brands statistically lower when they were assigned to customize a brand that served as means of reflecting their actual self ($M = 2.37$, $SD = .63$) versus a brand that served as a means of reflecting their ideal self, $M = 4.03$, $SD = .45$, $t(58) = -11.77$, $p < .001$.

[Table 1 about here]

As shown in Table 1, participants in the control group did not show significant differences in brand preference and WTP. However, the participants who focused on the present moment evaluated the customized brand more preferably when the brand served as a means of reflecting their actual self ($M = 4.09$, $SD = .60$) than when the brand served as a means of reflecting their ideal self, $M = 3.42$, $SD = .65$; $t(28) = 2.93$, $p < .05$, $d = 1.07$. Unexpectedly, there was a non-significant difference in WTP although the participants in the present focus group allocated a higher average amount to the brand that served as a means of reflecting their actual self ($M = 59.85$, $SD = 12.45$) compared to the brand that served as a means of reflecting their ideal self, $M = 53.22$, $SD = 9.34$; $t(28) = 1.65$, $p > .10$, $d = .60$. We suspect that reflecting four clothing price tags to participants led to an alternative brand comparison instead of assessing the focal brand itself. The effect of present focus and low-level construals of self (i.e., the consumer's actual self) may not be sensitive to the alternatives under evaluation when given in the temporally proximal condition in comparison to people in the temporally distant condition with high-level construals (Fujita *et al.*, 2008). Thus, hypothesis 1 is partially supported.

We further conducted post hoc analysis and the results were non-significant when comparing brand preference and WTP between the participants in present focus group who were

assigned to customize clothing that served as a means of reflecting their ideal self versus the those in the control group who were assigned to customize clothing that served as a means of reflecting their actual self (brand preference: $t(28) = -.25, p > .10$; WTP: $t(28) = 1.03, p > .10$) and ideal self (brand preference: $t(28) = -.34, p > .10$; WTP: $t(28) = .27, p > .10$).

5. Study 3

The objective of Study 3 was to investigate the effect of future focus and the effect of a brand's ability to serve as a means of reflecting the consumer's actual self versus consumer's ideal self on brand preference and WTP.

5.1 Design and procedure

Sixty students (65% women) from a large public university from Finland were approached to participate in an experiment in exchange for a small gift. Thirty percent of the sample were aged from 18 to 20 years old, 65% were from 21 to 30 years old, and 5% were from 31 to 60 years old. The study was a 2 (self-congruence: actual or ideal) \times 2 (temporal focus: future focus or control) between-subjects design. The design and procedure were similar to Study 2 except for the future focus measure—"I think about what my future has in store," "My mind focuses on my future" ($\alpha = .73$; adapted from Shipp *et al.*, 2009)—and the future focus writing task (Zimbardo and Boyd, 2008, pp. 155–156). Next, the participants were asked to respond in regard to brand preference ($\alpha = .93$), WTP, and self-congruence check ($\alpha = .88$).

5.2 Results and discussion

The manipulation checks showed that the participants who were assigned to the future focus writing task were not statistically more future focused ($M_{\text{post}} = 3.77$, $SD = .74$) compared to those in the control group, $M = 3.62$, $SD = .94$; $t(58) = .69$, $p > .10$. Also, participants in the future focus group did not show significant difference in the pre- versus post-future focus measure after the manipulation, $M_{\text{pre}} = 3.53$, $SD = .77$; $t(29) = -1.41$, $p > .10$. We suspect that the non-significant results happened because 95% of the participants were young adults, aged thirty or less, who tend to be future-focused (Mogilner *et al.*, 2012). Alternatively, we checked the manipulation effect by counting the number of participants who had rated the post-future focus measure higher than the pre-future focus measure. The result showed that 73% of the participants in the future focus group had rated the post-future focus measure higher after the future focus writing task, $\chi^2 (6.53)$, $N = 30$, $p < .05$. The self-congruence check confirmed that the participants rated the brand statistically lower when they were assigned to customize a brand that served as a means of reflecting their actual self ($M = 2.25$, $SD = .67$) versus a brand that served as a means of reflecting their ideal self, $M = 4.00$, $SD = .59$, $t(58) = -10.79$, $p < .001$.

[Table 2 about here]

As shown in Table 2, the participants in the control group did not show significant differences in brand preference and WTP. As predicted, the participants who focused on the future moment evaluated the customized brand more preferably when the brand served as a means of reflecting their ideal self ($M = 4.02$, $SD = .60$) than when the brand served as a means of reflecting their actual self, $M = 3.36$, $SD = .95$; $t(28) = 2.31$, $p < .05$, $d = .83$. Moreover, participants in the future focus group were willing to pay more for the brand that served as a

means of reflecting their ideal self ($M = 65.25$, $SD = 11.78$), the average being significantly higher than that which they were willing to pay for the brand that served as a means of reflecting their actual self, $M = 52.92$, $SD = 15.43$; $t(28) = 2.46$, $p < .05$, $d = .90$. Thus, Hypothesis 2 is supported.

As expected, the results were non-significant when comparing between the participants in future focus group who were assigned to customize clothing that served as a means of reflecting their actual self versus the those in the control group who were assigned to customize clothing that served as a means of reflecting their actual self (brand preference: $t(28) = .62$, $p > .10$; WTP: $t(28) = 1.00$, $p > .10$) and ideal self (brand preference: $t(28) = -.76$, $p > .10$; WTP: $t(28) = -.26$, $p > .10$). However, the question remains as to whether the customers associate with their actual self or ideal self when they devote their attention to thinking about a distant memory. Thus, we addressed this issue and the effect on brand preference and WTP in the next study.

6. Study 4

The objective of Study 4 was to investigate the effect of past focus and the effect of a brand's ability to serve as a means of reflecting the consumer's actual self versus consumer's ideal self on brand preference and WTP.

6.1 Design and procedure

Sixty students (63% women) from a large public university from Finland were approached to participate in an experiment in exchange for a small gift. Fifty percent of the sample were aged from 18 to 20 years old, 48% were from 21 to 30 years old, and 2% were from 31 to 40 years old. The study was a 2 (self-congruence: actual or ideal) \times 2 (temporal focus: past

focus or control) between-subjects design. The design and procedure were similar to Study 2 except for the past focus measure—“I replay memories of the past in my mind now,” “My mind thinks about things from my past” ($\alpha = .85$; adapted from Shipp *et al.*, 2009)—and the past focus writing task (Zimbardo & Boyd, 2008, pp. 91–93). Next, the participants were asked to respond to brand preference ($\alpha = .90$), WTP, and self-congruence check ($\alpha = .84$).

6.2 Results and discussion

The manipulation checks confirmed that the participants who were assigned to the past focus writing task were more past focused ($M_{\text{post}} = 4.27$, $SD = .50$) than those in the control group, $M = 3.35$, $SD = .83$; $t(58) = 5.16$, $p < .001$. A paired-samples t-test showed a significant difference in the pre- versus post-past focus measure after the manipulation, $M_{\text{pre}} = 3.42$, $SD = .82$; $t(29) = -6.35$, $p < .001$. The self-congruence check revealed that the participants rated the brand statistically lower when they were assigned to customize a brand that served as a means of reflecting their actual self ($M = 2.43$, $SD = .64$) versus a brand that served as a means of reflecting their ideal self, $M = 3.97$, $SD = .64$, $t(58) = -9.26$, $p < .001$.

[Table 3 about here]

As shown in Table 3, the participants who focused on the past moment evaluated the customized brand more preferably when the brand served as a means of reflecting their ideal self ($M = 4.04$, $SD = .73$) than when the brand served as a means of reflecting their actual self, $M = 3.38$, $SD = .80$; $t(28) = 2.39$, $p < .05$, $d = .86$. Further, the participants in the past focus group were willing to pay more for the brand that served as a means of reflecting their ideal self ($M =$

60.58, $SD = 11.83$) than for the brand that served as a means of reflecting their actual self, $M = 49.18$, $SD = 10.93$; $t(28) = 2.74$, $p < .05$, $d = 1.00$. Again, as expected, the participants in the control group did not show significant differences in brand preference and WTP, which supports Hypothesis 3.

As predicted, the results were non-significant when comparing between the participants in past focus group who were assigned to customize clothing that served as a means of reflecting their actual self versus the those in the control group who were assigned to customize clothing that served as a means of reflecting their actual self (brand preference: $t(28) = .57$, $p > .10$; WTP: $t(28) = .26$, $p > .10$) and ideal self (brand preference: $t(28) = -.66$, $p > .10$; WTP: $t(28) = -1.30$, $p > .10$).

7. General discussion

Study 1 provides an initial demonstration of the association between temporal focus and self-congruence. It shows that people who characteristically devoted their attention to thinking about the present moment were more likely to associate with actual self-congruence and those who thought about the future moment were more likely to associate with ideal self-congruence. Further, Study 1 showed that people might devote their attention to multiple temporal foci: they are equally engaged in the present and future moments. Studies 2 to 4 demonstrated that people in the present focus tended to evaluate a brand more preferably when it served as a means of reflecting their actual self, whereas people in the distant future and distant past focus tended to evaluate a brand more preferably when it served as a means of reflecting their ideal self. As for WTP that requires alternative comparisons, the effect only had a significant difference for people who focus on the distant future and distant past moments; suggesting that people are more

sensitive in temporally distant conditions than people in temporally proximal conditions, a finding that is congruent with Fujita *et al.* (2008). The current research also presented that the effect size of significant results in Studies 2, 3 and 4 ranged from 0.83 to 1.07, showing a large effect (Cohen, 1988). Thus, we support the notion that temporal focus influences the consumer's preference and WTP for the brand that serves as a means of reflecting the consumer's actual self or consumer's ideal self.

7.1 Theoretical contributions and implications

Addressing temporal focus and demonstrating the effects on brand preference and WTP empirically makes important contributions to existing research in self-congruence (Malär *et al.*, 2011; Sirgy *et al.*, 1997; Wallace *et al.*, 2017). First, we move the examination of consumer's self-congruity beyond psychogenic needs toward an understanding of the extent to which temporal focus influences self-congruence. An important remark is that our research shows that the unrelated brand experience and brand evaluation—one's temporal focus—is able to influence consumer preference and WTP for a symbolic brand. In addition to self-esteem, public self-consciousness, social tie strength, social desirability, need for uniqueness, and status consumption (Malär *et al.*, 2011; Roy and Rabbanee, 2015; Wallace *et al.*, 2017), temporal focus is proven to have significant influence in the fit of the perception of consumer's self with the brand's personality.

Specifically, our findings contribute to brand usage imagery congruity, which refers to how a brand is perceived suitable regarding the situation of use and the consumer's expectation of the typical use of the brand (Liu *et al.*, 2011). Our study shows that consumers' temporal focus determines their expectation for a symbolic brand. When people devote their attention to

thinking about the present moment, they anticipate the brand to serve as a means of their actual self-congruity, whereas when people devote their attention to thinking about the distant future or distant past moment, they anticipate the brand to serve as a means of their ideal self-congruity. These findings provide an alternate explanation for the non-significant effect of ideal self-congruence on emotional brand attachment (Malär *et al.*, 2011); we suspect this is due to the methodology used because participants were focusing on their current moment because they were in “here and now” while answering the survey questions. Consequently, they tended to have a higher emotional brand attachment toward a brand that served as a means of reflecting their actual self than their ideal self. A similar reason is given for Back *et al.*’s (2010) study on SNS, where their survey result showed people tend to reflect their actual personality instead of ideal personality because the participants were in present focus.

The current research also responds to Hollenbeck and Kaikati (2012) regarding their data revealed that consumers tended to use brands as means of their ideal self-congruity on SNS. One explanation is that Hollenbeck and Kaikati (2012) used a qualitative methodology, which they conducted diary analysis and in-depth interviews with undergraduate college students who ranged in age from 20 to 28, and the methodology does not require participants to focus on the present moment. We argue that young participants tend to be future-focused and anticipate ideal self-congruence, in line with Mogilner *et al.*’s (2012) finding where young adults are unceasingly more focused on the future than older people. Thus, temporal focus is crucial in self-congruence research because it would affect the process of brand usage imagery congruity.

Second, the current study addresses the call by Fitzsimons and Moore (2015) to systematically identify the potential adverse effect of temporal focus in consumer research. Generally, comparing to past and present focus, future focus tends to result in a greater positive

attitude and behavior, such as lower preferences for unhealthy snacks (Winterich and Haws, 2011), more preferences for consistency (Zimbardo and Boyd, 2008), and future optimistic (Foo *et al.*, 2009). On contrast, our study shows that present (vs. past and future) focus would contribute to a higher preference and is willing to pay more for a brand that serves as a means of reflecting consumer's actual (vs. ideal) self. These findings support the claims of Mogilner *et al.* (2012) that in the consumer context, people tend to have higher preferences toward a symbolic brand that matches with their temporal focus. Our study further shows that there is no significant adverse impact on brand preference and WTP resulting from the disassociation of temporal focus and consumer's self. We advocate that this disassociation only results in positive self-incongruity, but not results in either negative self-congruity or negative self-incongruity (Sirgy, 1982). That is, the temporal focus is not going to cause consumers perceiving a negative brand image because it is unrelated to a brand or product image.

Third, these findings contribute to construal level theory regarding a new type of psychological distance (Trope and Liberman, 2010). Although much research on temporal construal has taken place in consumer studies (Chen, 2016; Maier and Wilken, 2014), temporal focus has received limited consideration as a temporal construal, with the exception of the work of Winterich and Haws (2011). The current research suggests that the present focus is related to psychologically proximal entities, which is associated with low-level construals of self, whereas the future and past focus are related to psychologically distal entities, which are associated with high-level construals of self. It is important to note that we instructed the participants to think about their future in fifteen years time or to recall distant past events rather than asking them to reflect on the near future or recent past events. The reason for this being that near future or recent past events are related to psychologically proximal entities (Trope and Liberman, 2010).

In term of managerial implication, practitioners can enhance consumer preference and WTP toward their brands by using authentic (i.e., actual self) or aspirational (i.e., ideal self) branding, which corresponding to whether their customers are in the present, future, past moment. Alternatively, practitioners can influence the customers' temporal focus to match with their branding strategy. For authentic branding, practitioners can provide an environment or design an advertisement that is focusing on relaxed feeling (Mogilner *et al.*, 2012). For aspirational branding, practitioners can associate their advertisement with exciting (Mogilner *et al.*, 2012) or nostalgic feeling (Shields and Johnson, 2016).

7.2 Limitations and future directions

It is always challenging to measure the manipulating effect of temporal focus. In studies 2, 3, and 4 we did not have other evidence to identify the participants' temporal focus apart from the self-reported measures. Thus, a laboratory environment equipped with advanced technology tools (e.g., fMRI or another brain sensing headband) is recommended in order to measure the manipulating effect.

Our study did not explain the impression motivation behind the effect, such as self-presentation (Liu *et al.*, 2016). Instead, we used CLT to illustrate the association between temporal focus and the consumer's self. Based on regulatory focus (Avnet and Higgins, 2006), prior studies have shown that a prevention focus (vs. a promotion focus) is associated with low-level (vs. high-level) construals (Lee *et al.*, 2010). Thus, it is reasonable to establish the association between temporal focus, self-presentation, and regulatory focus.

An interesting avenue for future research is to examine the effect of temporal focus on emotions (Trope and Liberman, 2010) and the self-congruence. The association between

temporal focus with positive emotion is empirically proven to have an anticipated result on consumer decisions, especially in respect to self-control (Winterich and Haws, 2011). More importantly, emotion is associated with temporal construal (Lau-Gesk and Mukherjee, 2017). In one study, we asked 44 students between the ages of 18 and 30 (75% female) to evaluate their temporal focus on emotion. The result suggests that relaxation, surprise and joy are related to present focus; excitement, hopefulness, and motivation are related to future focus; and sadness is related to past focus. Further, emotion is relatively relevant to identity standards due to individuals' self-definitional meaning and perceived self-meaning (Carver and Scheier, 1990). However, more refined research needs to be conducted to justify how temporal focus and emotion fits into the framework of self-congruence (Stryker and Burke, 2000).

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